



MUCH TO PRESERVE— AND MUCH TO CHANGE

What must Catholic K–12 schools in the United States do to reverse declining enrollment?

By Alan J. Borsuk

At 7:40 a.m. each school day, save only when the weather is extreme, the 200 students of St. Vincent Pallotti Catholic School on Milwaukee’s west side line up outside the school door, each grade on its assigned painted line. Principal Jeffrey Johnson calls out, “Our help is in the name of the Lord.” The students respond, “Who made Heaven and Earth.” Then they sing a hymn and say the Lord’s Prayer. There is an opportunity for individual prayers. And then everyone goes into the building.

There’s still a lot of life and tradition in the modest building that houses the kindergarten-through-eighth-grade school. But if the start of the day could be straight from a few decades ago, the realities in the school are very much from today. In particular: The families who belong to the church a few feet away have few children, so this is no longer really a parish school. A generation ago, all the students were Catholic and white. Now, about half the students are not Catholic. And the student body in recent years has been about a third white, a third African American, and a third Hispanic.

The academic focus of the school has changed as well. Less than a third of the St. Vincent Pallotti students were rated as proficient or advanced in reading or

math in Wisconsin’s standardized tests in the fall of 2013. That’s better than the average for Milwaukee schools, but it means there is an urgent need to do better, and the school staff is changing curriculum, approaches to teaching, and the degree to which students’ needs are dealt with in individualized ways.

The pursuit of building the students’ Catholic faith is more energetic and more traditional at this school than at many. But even that has changed, with the more diverse student population one of the factors. Johnson said that the culture of St. Vincent Pallotti puts great emphasis on “the inherent dignity” in each person, and the school mission statement says, “We embrace the visible acceptance of all and recognize a higher purpose to each life.” ▶▶

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Andy Smarick, a partner in a Washington-based nonprofit, Bellwether Education Partners, and senior policy fellow with the Thomas B. Fordham Institute

St. Vincent Pallotti is on the high end of urban Catholic schools in Milwaukee when it comes to academics, the teaching of Catholic values, and general vitality. And, thanks to Wisconsin’s publicly funded program of private school vouchers, Milwaukee is on the high end compared to the vitality of Catholic schools in many other urban areas.

But even on the high end, the forces changing Catholic schools are monumental. Responding to them is an increasingly urgent priority. Look at the overall scene, and you have to wonder where schools such

as St. Vincent Pallotti—and especially those that are weaker—are headed and what can be done to keep sufficient life in Catholic schools, a core part of the Catholic church in the United States for generations.

How monumental are the forces? The National Catholic Educational Association

reports that enrollment in Catholic elementary and secondary schools in 2013–2014 was 1,974,578 students. That is less than 40 percent of the 5.25 million in 1960. In fact, the number today is very close to the total in 1920. To underscore it differently: The association says that, since 2003, nearly a quarter of Catholic schools in the United States have closed.

Broad forces beyond the domain of schools are reshaping American Catholic institutions. They include changing demographics, the decline of white ethnic urban parishes, the growth of the Hispanic population (many of its members Catholic), changing American cultural standards and practices, and problems within the church itself. But forces within the domain of schools are also in need of attention, and there is a

growing effort to take steps to stop and even reverse the decline of Catholic schools.

Marquette Law School is making itself a convener and crossroads for discussion of the state of Catholic K–12 schools and what lies ahead. On November 19, 2014, the Law School, together with the Marquette College of Education, sponsored a conference, “The Future of Catholic K–12 Education: National and Milwaukee Perspectives,” at Eckstein Hall. It brought together national and local scholars and players, both at the podium and in the audience. A Marquette Law School Poll, focused on opinions about Catholic schools in several metropolitan areas, is in the works, with other events focusing on the future of Catholic schools also likely.

In provocative remarks at the Eckstein Hall conference, Andy Smarick, a partner in a Washington-based nonprofit, Bellwether Education Partners, and a senior policy fellow with the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, said that he was excited about some positive developments for Catholic schools. These included increasing options to support schools with public funding and philanthropic grants. “But let’s get honest about this,” Smarick said. “Virtually 50 consecutive years of losing schools and losing enrollment. . . . If you don’t think something’s wrong with that, I think you have your head in the sand.”

Patrick Lofton, executive vice president of the D.C.-based National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA), who attended the conference, agreed in an interview that “in some respects, Catholic schools are in a crisis right now.” He added, “If we’re going to have viable, sustainable Catholic schools, we have to rethink our model.”

As for Milwaukee itself, a report presented to the archdiocese in September 2013 by consultants from the University of Notre Dame’s Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) said, “The leadership of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee



Archbishop Jerome Listecky gave opening remarks at the Catholic K–12 education conference.



Marquette Law School's Mike Gousha with Notre Dame Law School's Margaret F. Brinig and Nicole Stelle Garnett

now stands at a critical juncture” in responding to a list of concerns about Catholic schools. The consultants called for “rigorous self-reflection.”

Particularly in urban areas, more is at stake than simply whether a particular school or group of schools stays open, two scholars said at the Law School event. Margaret F. Brinig and Nicole Stelle Garnett, both Notre Dame Law School professors, described what they found in researching their 2014 book, *Lost Classroom, Lost Community: Catholic Schools' Importance in Urban America*. In a public conversation led by Mike Gousha, Marquette Law School's distinguished fellow in law and public policy, Brinig and Garnett said that the closing of Catholic schools in urban areas correlates with a decline in the “social capital” of the surrounding neighborhoods. The data they used, which focused largely on Chicago, controlled for a range of other aspects of neighborhoods and found a negative impact on neighborhoods that matched specifically with Catholic school closings.

In other words, the closing of a Catholic school harms the surrounding community in measurable ways. Similar results were found in Philadelphia, though not in Los Angeles, the two said, adding that Los Angeles has some of the lowest social capital on a neighborhood basis of any place in the country.

One aspect of what Brinig and Garnett found in studying school closings was that if a parish priest and others involved in a parish fought to keep a school open, they often succeeded. That led the authors to encourage

Catholic school communities to advocate strongly for their future.

But more needs to be done than simply keeping schools open. Several of the crucial challenges facing Catholic schools were spotlighted at the conference and in follow-up interviews and reporting. They deserve particular attention.

ACADEMIC QUALITY

One of the primary reasons historically for parents to choose Catholic schools was the quality of the education itself. That remains true at many schools, including many high schools that are academic powerhouses. But especially in urban centers, students in Catholic schools often do no better than public school students—and results are distressing for both sectors. The challenges connected to poverty and social change have had big impacts. But critics say that Catholic schools themselves have not responded with sufficient innovation and commitment to finding ways to succeed.

Kathleen Cepelka, superintendent of Catholic schools for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, told the Marquette conference, “We are not satisfied.” A look at a few examples from public data about how students in Milwaukee's voucher program did on state tests in fall 2013 underscores why. Only 2 percent of students at St. Catherine's School on Milwaukee's west side were rated as proficient or better in reading or math. For Blessed Savior Catholic, a combined ▶▶



Marquette Law School's Alan J. Borsuk with Andy Smarick, a partner in a Washington-based education nonprofit and a senior policy fellow with the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, and Kathleen Porter-Magee, superintendent of the Partnership for Inner-City Education in New York

group of four former parish schools on the north side, the overall figure was 6 percent in reading and 5 percent in math. At St. Adalbert on the south side, it was 13 percent in reading and 21 percent in math.

What is being done elsewhere? One initiative is to bring some of the intense education strategies of high-performing charter schools to low-performing Catholic schools.

Kathleen Porter-Magee was recently named superintendent of the Partnership for Inner-City Education in New York, with the job of turning around six Catholic schools in Harlem and the Bronx. She described to the Eckstein Hall audience her efforts to build up the quality of teachers and teaching in the schools. Many of the teachers have been given little to no coaching, and education aims need to be much higher, with close monitoring of student success and effective response when a child isn't moving ahead adequately. She said she was aiming to establish, among

the adults involved in the schools, a clear, shared vision of "what excellence looks like." "Developing the talent we have," she added, "is the first thing to focus on."

Smarick, who was part of the conference panel with Porter-Magee and whose work often has focused on Catholic schools, said that some of the most talented and innovative Catholic educators were working in non-Catholic schools because their entrepreneurial and ambitious ideas for energizing schools were more welcomed elsewhere. Smarick said, though, that he was encouraged by what is unfolding in cities around the country where an "analog" to charter schools is arising for Catholic education. One of those initiatives, the Cristo Rey high school network, which emphasizes both high standards and giving students experience in workplaces, is opening a school in Milwaukee in fall 2015.

When he was later asked for his reaction to the statement that some enterprising educators preferred to work outside of Catholic schools, the

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national association’s Lofton said that he generally agreed. “I believe there is a culture that exists in some sectors of Catholic education that really does stifle creativity and stifle entrepreneurship,” he said. “That’s a challenge for us. I’m a big believer that we’ve got to think outside the box.”

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Lofton said, “One of the critical pieces that we’re seeing at the national level is that there is a crisis of leadership in Catholic schools.” For one thing, many current principals and superintendents are aging, “and we don’t have a pipeline of succession.” He added, “We know schools rise and fall on the quality of the leader.”

William Henk, dean of the Marquette College of Education, agreed. “The formula starts with leadership,” he said. And from that it expands to the people whom a good leader brings in as teachers and staff and how good a job that leader does in developing those people’s skills. “You’re only as good as your people,” Henk said.

Catholic school leaders, including Milwaukee Superintendent Cepelka, know this is a big need. Their mission includes finding ways to keep talented young educators in Catholic schools. Many now leave their jobs early in their careers.

GOVERNANCE

Cepelka told the conference at the Law School that changes were coming in the way Milwaukee’s Catholic schools are governed, especially the more than two dozen elementary schools in the City of Milwaukee. Governance is an issue nationwide, as well.

The ACE consultants were particularly concerned about inadequate oversight of schools. In one report, summarizing what they found at nine schools on the north side of Milwaukee, they concluded, “There is little evidence of a governance structure that is working effectively”

The Milwaukee archdiocese has created a task force on the future of schools. One of its biggest concerns will be to find ways to run schools more effectively

both as businesses and as education institutions. That may mean more-centralized operations when it comes to such things as purchasing and personnel management, as well as stronger academic leadership from the archdiocese office. Catholic schools now operate with a substantial degree of autonomy.

Nationwide, Lofton said, Catholic schools need to make big changes in how they are governed, including having boards with more expertise that take a stronger role in oversight. “I think that new governance models are much needed,” he said. Schools need to have boards that are focused on making sure a school stays financially healthy and has a long-term strategic vision.

CATHOLIC IDENTITY

Faith formation is a key issue, several speakers at the November 19 conference said. Laura Gutierrez, vice president of academic affairs for St. Anthony School on Milwaukee’s south side, said that the parents and students of the school, close to 100 percent of them Hispanic, are looking for faith formation and safety, as well as a good education. Even though the percentage of those who are Catholic is very high, their actual religious practice needs development, Gutierrez said. “We need to show that we’re valuing it as the adults leading this fight,” she said.

In a follow-up interview, Cepelka was asked whether faith formation in schools needs improvement. “Major,” she answered. “There are schools that need to teach religion more faithfully.” She pointed to St. Vincent Pallotti as a good example of how to do this well. The ACE consultants who studied Milwaukee schools said they found “a pervasive lack of Catholic identity” in some schools. ▶▶



Kathleen Cepelka, superintendent of Catholic schools for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee



Laura Gutierrez, vice president of academic affairs for St. Anthony School on Milwaukee's south side, and Father Tim Kitzke, a member of the pastoral team for several parishes in Milwaukee and a leader of Catholic East Elementary School

A major change from prior generations is that many Catholic schools in urban areas are now enrolling large numbers of non-Catholic children. Cepelka said at the conference that there are some schools on the north side of Milwaukee where more than 95 percent of students are not Catholic. But, she said, school leaders continue to take seriously the call to “teach as Jesus did.” She said that the parents who enrolled their children want the education and environment a Catholic school offers and that she could count on two hands the number of voucher students who have used their legal right to “opt-out” of religious events such as a Mass.

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In many central cities, the closing of schools has been much more widespread than in Milwaukee, as Catholic families have moved to the suburbs and the cost of running schools has shot up in an era when there are almost no low-paid nuns teaching. In some cities, many Catholic schools have been

turned into non-religious charter schools—a step that, in Brinig and Garnett’s assessment of the evidence, has not brought “social capital” benefits, let alone those of having a Catholic school.

Marquette’s Henk at the November conference observed that, in the ten-county Milwaukee archdiocese, one school in five has closed since 1965, and that number would be much larger without vouchers. Milwaukee has the oldest and arguably the highest-impact urban voucher program in the country. It allows the education of about 27,000 private school students, thousands of them in Catholic schools, to be underwritten with public money, generally more than \$7,000 per student. Without the voucher program, in which Milwaukee Catholic schools have participated since 1998, Cepelka said, church schools in Milwaukee would be in “a very different place . . . a scary and probably purely survival mode.”

Enrollment overall has been close to stable in Milwaukee in recent years, while it has declined nationwide. But Milwaukee schools have varied

in their success in enrolling students. On the one hand, St. Anthony School on the south side has gone from being a fading parish school in the mid-1990s to now having almost 2,000 students, making it the largest Catholic K–12 school in the nation. On the other hand, some schools are “on life support,” Cepelka said, as they struggle with both educational success and low enrollment.

The ACE consultants said in 2013 that, nationwide, there were 400,000 “empty seats” in Catholic schools, “a remarkable 36 percent of which are in states that already have a choice program” making it financially more feasible for parents to enroll their children in Catholic schools. In other words, even when paying tuition isn’t the issue, the quality and attractiveness of a program can be—which leads back to the discussion at the November conference about how to increase the success and appeal of Catholic schools.

In the words of Father Tim Kitzke, a member of the pastoral team for several parishes in Milwaukee and a leader of Catholic East Elementary School, you need a good product. Fifteen years ago, Kitzke said, he would not have sent a hypothetical child of his own to Catholic East because the school was offering “a bad product.” But the school has made major improvements, and now he would enroll that child. He said that schools need to do more to change their culture to focus on children and their needs.

Thomas Kiely, director of the Institute for Catholic Leadership at Marquette University, said in an interview that Catholic schools need better academic and religious visions of what they are aiming to accomplish. The institute is working to help improve K–12 education, both in Milwaukee and beyond. Kiely said he sees in the schools “a lot of very dedicated people who are

under-resourced, and not just monetarily.” Overall, there is a lot of enthusiasm for the schools among parents, and parents are choosing Catholic schools intentionally.

Henk said in an interview that compared to five or ten years ago, things are better. “I think the will is stronger because people are no longer in denial that Catholic schools are at risk,” he said. And well-chosen innovations have been launched.

Smarick said that Catholic leaders have a choice: “Keep doing the things we’ve been doing that have led to [a] slow demise consistently for half a century. Or open your minds and do things differently. We’re starting to see on the horizon sunlight for the very first time.” He offered three areas that need to change:

- “straight-up transparency and accountability” that make clear to parents and broader communities how well a school is doing;
- an understanding of the changing landscape of educational options for parents so that Catholic schools can position themselves as ones that more parents choose for their children; and
- the unleashing of more “entrepreneurialism” among those who want to lead Catholic schools.

“It was time for the milkman to go away,” Smarick said. “It was time for trains to get replaced by airplanes. Progress sometimes is progress. And that means breaking eggs sometimes to make omelets. So I’m bullish about the possibility of young entrepreneurs and related laity in these systems saying we have to try things differently, and that means replacing yesterday’s Catholic schools with a new breed of Catholic schools.”

On this view, the Catholic K–12 urban schools of the future would look even more different from the schools of a half-century ago than they do today—but they would again be thriving. ■

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